



Lighting Up the Sky

By Marie Hodge

It's a drizzly spring night in Spartanburg, SC, but a cadre of die-hard enthusiasts aren't deterred from the 28th annual Spartanburg Spring Fling. On one of the town's main streets, they stand behind ropes to cheer on cyclists in the SmithBarney Classic Pro Race. Later, hospital-bed races between two rival medical centers draw good-natured jibes from onlookers and participants alike. There's nothing quite like trash talk in scrubs.

On the main stage in Barnet Park, Tamboricua, a Latin dance band from Atlanta, moves from salsa to merengue to Latin jazz. Other bands rock on at surrounding stages. Nearby, a brightly lit street filled with the carts of food vendors offers the usual fare, from cotton candy to corn dogs.

Then it is time.

By a little after 10pm, the merriment is winding down. Visitors settle down with their funnel cakes to wait for the climax of the evening, a dazzling display.

Then the fireworks begin.

A loud pop, a burst of color, and once the display explodes on the scene, all eyes are drawn skyward—measuring colors, patterns, the startling images against the vastness of the night sky. “Whoa!” one man says to his wife and little boy as streaks of white shimmy upward and fall back to earth in a red and gold ring, “How ‘bout that one?” The multicolored images spin into chrysanthemums, peonies, even willow and palm trees.

Fifteen minutes later, there is a pause, and the crowd wonders. “Is it over?” an occasional voice asks, sounding disappointed that the festivities should end with a whimper.

But then the sky explodes once again, this time in a display of color, light and sound that is so rapid-fire it's almost impossible to take it all in. When the beautiful images have finally exhausted themselves, the same father asks his son, “Did you like it?”

“The ending was gr-rreat!” he exclaims.

The talk is enthusiastic, energized, as the crowd disperses. Some came for music. Some came for cycling. Some came for food. But they all shared the sky art known as fireworks, and they all leave united in the joy of color and sound.

Creating scenes like these has been a labor of love for decades for partners Jeff Hale and John Casey. Hale's been doing them for 22 years, and he thrills to the motto of “Beauty, precision, excitement and noise.” He and Casey met through a hobbyist organization dedicated to fireworks.

“Fireworks displays bridge generations and create memories,” Casey says. It is, he believes, the mom-and-apple-pie thing: More and more communities are seeking to draw communities together through the kind of nostalgic, picturesque scenes associated with American small towns of the past. Then, grandma, her children and her grandchildren spread a blanket and munched fried chicken as the fireworks created a climax to a day of wholesome activities. With fireworks, the same is true today.

Fireworks improve the draw of even that most American of American pastimes—baseball. Hale says a baseball game featuring fireworks at its conclusion can draw additional crowds of hundreds more people into the stands. It seems to be the perfect end to a summer's evening.

What's Hale and Casey's favorite holiday? Well the 4th of July is obviously their busiest day. On July 4, 2006, they had 28 engagements requiring 68 crew members and eight transport drivers.

But Hale and Casey are lighting up quite a few events beyond Independence Day and New Year's Eve. They want to make fireworks a year-round pleasure in South Carolina. And clearly, they're on their way: In 2007, their gigs in Columbia include the April 2 Gervais Street Bridge celebration and the Finlay Park Summer Concert Series on June 2, June 30 and the July 28 finale; the 50th anniversary of the Coastal Carolina Fair Oct. 25-Nov. 3 at the Ladson Fairgrounds in the Lowcountry and—of course—a reprise at the Spartanburg Spring Fling May 5-7. It's a great way for South Carolina residents and visitors to come together in celebration.